

**6th Sunday of Easter, 17th May 2020, Grantchester & Newnham**  
**Acts 17:22-31, John 14:15-21**

The passage we heard read from Acts chapter 17 this morning is a most wonderful, intriguing, challenging, encouraging set of verses. There is so much in it that it requires rather a lot of unpacking - it lends itself to a study series, rather than a 10 minute sermon.

Lets briefly set the scene. We are in Athens with Paul. He sees around him the idols and temples and gods of the Greeks. He is distressed at the religiosity of the people, but the fact that they have missed, in his mind, the one true God despite their energies, sacrifices and rituals. The verses just before the ones we heard today see Paul debating with the religious people, Jews and Greeks alike, in the synagogues and in the market place.

Then a group of epicureans and stoics – philosophers and great thinkers – got a bit further into debate. They were big thinkers, we know that, they enjoyed talking about and thinking about the latest ideas. And they were interested in what Paul was saying and they invite him to the Areopagus. Now the Areopagus is a place - I have been there – a large flat rock area just below the Parthenon in Athens. And this was the place, it seems, that these great thinkers and elders gathered, perhaps formally but more likely informally for debate.

Let's look at what he said to them. First of all, Paul speaks to them with affirmation. People of Athens, I see that you are very religious. He has found his way in to speak of faith and he does so, at least to begin, with a positive. He then goes on to speak of the God of creation, the God of the world. He tells them of the God who is present everywhere, no-one and nowhere is outside of God's love. I can just imagine him standing on that rock

gesturing up to the temple, the Parthenon, urging people to recognise that God isn't confined to a building (good news for us at the moment as we can't meet in our church building!) but is close to each of us wherever we are. The thrust of his text is that they need to know the God who made the world, who is present, not distant, not needing to be appeased by sacrifice, the God who is for them. They don't need to sacrifice to God for he is the God who has given everything and he is here, now.

There is loads in this passage for **us**, today. We are in a very different context to Paul but we are still tasked with drawing people into the love of that same God. So where is the Cambridge 21<sup>st</sup> century equivalent of the Areopagus. Who are the big thinkers of the time? Who is exploring faith and spirituality but missing the God we claim to know?

We need to ponder our language and our attitude to people who aren't like us in faith and belief, but who are exploring spiritual things and then we need to trust the Spirit to guide them, and us, into all truth, as John says in his gospel. How can we affirm people in their spiritual searching, while at the same time speaking the truth of God and enabling people to encounter him?

Many years ago I read a book by Rob Bell, an American Christian writer and minister, and I want to read a section of it as I think he has grasped something really important and I have always loved it. He says this...

*Last year some friends asked me to be the pastor for their wedding ceremony. They said they didn't want any Jesus or God or bible or religion to be talked about. But they did want to make it really spiritual. The bride said it in her own great way, 'Rob, do that thing you do. Make it really profound and deep and spiritual!'*

*So we decided to meet to plan the ceremony. It was stunningly beautiful day, and we met on a cliff overlooking a lake in the midst of a thick forest. The wind was blowing the tops of the trees way up above us, the sun was coming through in yellow and white beams, and at one point an eagle flew overhead.*

*Anyway, I asked my friends why they wanted to be married in such a natural, organic setting, since it was four hours from where we all live. They talked about the beauty of nature, its peacefulness and the way they fell in love in this part of the state. Then the groom said something I will never forget: 'something holds this all together.'*

*Something holds this all together.*

*So then I asked them if they thought it was a mistake that they had found each other. And they said no, they believed they were meant to be together and it was no accident that they met and fell in love. I then asked them, 'do you think whatever it is that holds all this together is the same thing that has brought you two together?' they said, yes. Same thing.*

*So I said that maybe what makes their relationship so meaningful to them is that it's a picture of something much bigger. The same force that brought them together holds the whole world together.*

*They then said they would call this glue, this force, 'God'.*

*I tell you all this to point out that my friends already intuitively believe certain things about the universe and the way the world works. All I was doing was asking questions about things they already knew to be true. I didn't have to convince them of anything.*

It would have been so easy for Rob Bell to be offended at that couple's comments about God, religion, the bible etc. that he could have refused to be part of it. What's the point?

But what Rob Bell did, and what Paul does at the Areopagus, is see the glimmer of something spiritual, the glimmer of faith that perhaps people don't have the right language for, the searching and yearning for God, and speaks faith, speaks God, into the situation. Yes there is time for discussion and debate when we find ourselves with the modern day equivalents of Epicureans and Stoics who want to argue and grapple, but what about at the Areopagus? Do we believe that God is everywhere and for everyone? Do we trust that Holy Spirit, promised by Jesus to his followers in the words from John's gospel today, the Spirit of truth, to do his work, guide our speech and to lead people into the presence and knowledge of God? Do we look for the glimmer of God already at work in people even if they can't find the 'right' words?

*Acts 17:24-28 (Contemporary English Version)*

*This God made the world and everything in it. He is Lord of heaven and earth, and he doesn't live in temples built by human hands. He doesn't need help from anyone. He gives life, breath, and everything else to all people. From one person God made all nations who live on earth, and he decided when and where every nation would be.*

*God has done all this, so that we will look for him and reach out and find him. He isn't far from any of us, and he gives us the power to live, to move, and to be who we are.*